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ARTICLE

# Speaking of Leonardo Da Vinci's Mother: A Critique of Freud's Notion of Identification

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In this paper, I discuss some blind spots in Freud's conception of identification, starting from his 1910 text, *Leonardo Da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood*. By analysing the way Freud construes Leonardo's mother, Caterina, we gain important insights into Freud's oscillations between anatomical, symbolic and ontological considerations, when speaking of women and of identification. I show how Freud 'oedipalises' Leonardo's story. Oedipus becomes central by assembling a pre-oedipal seductive mother; and by crafting a pre-oedipal and post-oedipal condition of fatherlessness. Drawing on Jessica Benjamin's overinclusive view of development, I ask what we gain by reimagining Leonardo's mother in terms of arriving at a non-oedipalised solution to the problems of sameness and difference – the inseparable facets of identification.

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## Freud on Identification: A Critique

The problem of identification is the umbilicus<sup>1</sup> of the psychoanalytic conception of sexual difference. Without revising some of the blind spots in Freud's ideas on identification, we might get stuck in our attempts to illuminate the problem of sexual difference for our flesh-and-blood patients. I turn to Freud's 1910 piece on Leonardo Da Vinci, in an attempt to give voice to Leonardo's mother and to clarify some of Freud's misconstructions regarding her. In so doing, I tackle this umbilical matter of identification. The ways Freud saw the identifications of the homosexual boy has marked his entire theoretical edifice on 'identification'. In his 1910 text, when he speaks of identification, Freud shifts and free-floats between *anatomical* criteria (based on the anatomical sex of the parties which are involved in the process), *symbolic* criteria (related to the modes of desire and the figuration of sexual characteristics which surpasses strict anatomical considerations), and *ontological* criteria (referring to what is most abstract in the sphere of sexual difference, to necessary affirmation of something versus something-different).<sup>2</sup> This shifting ground of identification criteria is not marked or discussed. Leonardo is at times the protagonist of an impossible attempt at anatomical identification with his mother. At other times, he is seen as identifying with the mode of desire of the mother (which is here deemed as one of a heterosexual woman). Finally, identification happens, more abstractly, with the feminine pole of sexual difference.

As I show, the silent shifting of these dimensions of identification constitute the very plausibility of the argument in Freud's text. In this construction, *a certain fantasy of the mother emerges, at the expense of other fantasies*. This (theoretical) fantasy of the mother is treated as a (psychobiographical) reality. Freud makes ample use of the biographical details available at that time about Leonardo's mother, Caterina, treating her both as a historical character and as Leonardo's internal object. When he puts these details together, however, his theoretical assumptions

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<sup>1</sup> By 'umbilicus' I wish to demarcate a type of connection between psychoanalytic concepts that is essential, generative, but also hidden and in need of further elaboration.

<sup>2</sup> See Rocha (2002) for a discussion of these criteria in Freud's conception of women's castration. He proposes the same distinction between anatomical/symbolic/ontological layers.

about motherhood, fatherhood and fatherlessness, and about the place of Oedipus in psychosexual development, speak louder than the psychobiographical analysis.

In what follows, I propose a critique of Freud, while still valuing the productive and radical nature of his take on identification and homosexuality. The de-pathologisation of homosexuality was, at that time, a radical proposition. The reasons for a careful return to Freud paradoxically rest on some post-Freudian marked failures. In what concerns the understanding of feminine sexuality and of sexualities (in the plural, without the championing of a form of genitality that is necessarily heterosexual and that is reduced to the 'correct' object choice), I consider that the three decades between the end of the Second World War and the 1980s, are, to a large extent, unfortunate times. In these decades, it seems that heteronormativity limited psychoanalytic thinking, Freud's radical edge was lost, and psychoanalysis lagged behind other domains in the social sciences and the humanities (sociology, anthropology, literary studies) in making sense of sexualities (Frosh 2008). Starting with the 1980s, there have been important attempts to arrive at a decentred and pluralising phenomenology of the psychic, in which selfhood and subjectivity emerge through shifting and multiple identifications (Benjamin 1998, p. 47; Harris 2005).

Within such a phenomenology, sexual difference is not constituted through the operation of a *single major division* (masculine/feminine, resulting in correctly gendered males/females). Instead, we find ways to problematise oedipal complementarity, which is based on a logic of mutual exclusivity; and we take steps towards a thorough reflection on an obscured and neglected pre-oedipal phenomenon, that of *overinclusivity* (Benjamin 1998, Fast 1984). As we will see, the overinclusive position, which never loses its significance and its particular mark in sexual development and in the story of experiencing sexual difference of every individual, transcends active/passive dichotomies. The overinclusive phase does not know of the logic centered on *either/or*, but functions according to the logic of *both/and*. This phase cannot be equated in any simplistic way with a state of fusion or an object-less state; nor can it be reduced to a polymorphous phase. Instead, it is based on a *thirdness* that has logical operations different from oedipal thirdness, and it is no less important for post-oedipal psychic formations. Sameness and difference

often appear to us in a hidden hierarchy, where sameness is equated with fusion and danger, while difference is overvalued. In other words, oedipal complementarity can be turned into a normative ideal. As Jessica Benjamin (2012) argues, there is a potential triad to be found in any dyad, while all triads can also be grasped through looking at their underlying dyadic relations. It is important to focus on the qualities and contents of all these dyadic and triadic bonds, instead of insisting on oedipal complementarity.

When Freud talks of his homosexual patients, he argues that they somehow get stuck between the auto-erotic phase and object love (via narcissism). This 'getting stuck' is never sufficiently elucidated; it is black-boxed by the shifting idea of identification, which, as it best serves the argument, sometimes refers to brute anatomical facts (the male homosexual chooses a 'man' as an object later in life, or a feminine man, the equivalent of the female with a penis); other times it refers to the symbolic register (the young boy identifies with the desire of the mother, which, as the story goes, is necessarily heterosexual desire); and yet other times it refers to the ontologisation of difference. The result of free-floating criteria for identification is that while the object choice and the story of sexual differentiation is always treated with curiosity and as an instance of compromise formation, *the making of the heterosexual orientation seems to require no explanation* (Benjamin 1998; Chodorow 1992, 2003). It is reified. It is the 'normal' which thus becomes just a black box, instead of being a story of specific vicissitudes, renunciations and recuperations. To put it differently, we seem to be getting used to a state of affairs where there is *no psychogenesis of heterosexuality, but only one of homosexuality*. Heterosexuality comes across as bypassing process. What I propose here is that the anatomical criterion never operates on its own. If we wish to unpack the umbilical point of identification, we need to avoid falling into the trap of reducing gender to sex; or of reducing sexual difference to sex. The anatomical/symbolical/ontological work together, so only considered together can they lead us further in understanding the story of sexual differentiation of any embodied individual.

## Speaking of Leonardo Da Vinci's Mother

Over a century has passed since Freud wrote his essay on Leonardo Da Vinci and his psychosexual constitution. And yet, some of the scaffolding of this text remains unspoken. After more than one century, it is important to talk of Leonardo Da Vinci's mother. As I show in what follows, she is at times emptied of desire, or seen to make of baby Leonardo her sole object. At times, she is filled with biologising details. She is trapped in her anatomy. She comes to incarnate the 'single mother', overinvested in her child, and seductive of him. While in fact a whole network of care-givers surrounded Leonardo, Freud is committed to two complementary constructions: *the seductive mother* and *fatherlessness*. There are few reasons to believe that Leonardo's social state of having been born outside the institution of marriage would have triggered as much stigma, shame and sense of lack as Freud suggests. Freud himself shows attraction to the idea of fatherlessness as a key to Leonardo's psychosexual development, insufficiently aware that it 'grew' to the proportions known to the Viennese heteronormative and patriarchal society only much later. There is a certain version of 'fatherfulness' that patriarchy needs to maintain, which is based precisely on the production and reproduction of the fear of fatherlessness. Freud projects back the sense of fatherlessness of his own time onto the times of Leonardo. A crucial psychoanalytic question thus remains unasked: *what if Leonardo's mother had an internal third?* What if she could invest other objects, apart from baby Leonardo? What if it is her internal third that is tied into Leonardo's unusual creativities and paths to sublimation, rather than his supposed sense of fatherlessness, his fusion with the primary object, and his hidden homosexuality?

In asking these questions, I do not wish to criticise Freud for not proposing a psychobiography of Caterina, rather than Leonardo. By contrast, I wish to explore the *function of the fantasy of the seductive mother* in conceiving of homosexuality and identification. Importantly, Freud does not treat Caterina as a fantasy for Leonardo, but he makes assumptions about her own desire, on the basis of the biographic details available. These assumptions gradually converge on the image of *seduction by the mother*, which I believe is a theoretically-invested fantasy. Leaving this fantasy

undisturbed works at the expense of *other possible fantasies*, including one in which the mother is positively tied into the unusual creativity of her son. Furthermore, by taking Jessica Benjamin's intersubjective theory seriously in this context, we give a particular direction to our mother-fantasies. A psychic world opens in which there is always *a subject and another subject*, and also *the psychic space in-between them, in their encounter*. An oedipal boy alone with his mother-fantasy is thus a too narrow fantasy, or a problematic fantasy in itself, which banishes both the mother and the third space they are able to create together.

Let us discern the context of Freud's work at the time when *Leonardo Da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood* was written. Around 1910, Freud was strongly immersed in the oedipal paradigm of conflict, as well as in his thinking on narcissism. He was publishing works on the importance of the Oedipus complex (1910b), on the psychogenic disturbance of vision (1910c); he also published his paper on wild analysis (1910d).

Freud understood the speculative character of his study of Leonardo (Coltrera 1965). Our goal here is not to belittle the genre of psychobiography – on the contrary, Freud takes a radical step in showing how the psychoanalyst can illuminate the connections between the artist's psychosexual constitution and unconscious marks, on the one hand, and the form, composition and context of his artwork, on the other hand (Blum 2001). In a sense, I extend Freud's reflections on the unconscious of the creator to Freud's own writing, pointing to some unspoken aspects of his countertransference with Leonardo, with Leonardo's creations, and with Leonardo's mother. It is known that Freud had great admiration and even envy for artists and their own solutions of sublimation; he could also experience deep states of contemplation in front of works of art, as was the case with his daily visits to Michelangelo's statue of Moses during his three-month stay in Rome, or with the attention he gave to Leonardo's paintings. Despite all of these virtues in theory construction and experimentation, I argue that *Leonardo Da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood* cannot be said to be a path-opener in studies of the pre-oedipal, as some voices have stressed (Blum 2001). It is rather the case that the oedipal paradigm spills over in more or less subtly, colouring the ways the pre-oedipal and the post-oedipal meet us in his text. It is these 'spillings' that I would like to analyse in what follows.



The extended psychobiography of Leonardo is made possible by the attention that Freud gives to a small detail that escaped other biographers and art critics. It is a note of a dream, a fragmentary memory. Freud puts it at the centre of his attempt to understand Leonardo's character and his creativity: 'It seems that I was always destined to be so deeply concerned with vultures; for I recall as one of my very earliest memories that while I was in my cradle a vulture came down to me, and opened my mouth with its tail, and struck me many times with its tail against my lips' (Freud 1910a, p. 82). What is of great importance here, for situating this piece in the context of Freud's thought, is that at this time he already treated this fragment as a screen memory [Deckerinnerung], in full understanding of the phantasmatic dimension of this fragment, and of the different times of inscription on which it must have relied. As Freud clarifies:

A man's conscious memory of the events of his maturity is in every way comparable to the first kind of historical writing [which was a chronicle of current events]; while the memories that he has of his childhood correspond, as far as their origins and reliability are concerned, to the history of a nation's earliest days, which was compiled later and for tendentious reasons. (1910a, p. 84)

Freud reads the bird's tail in the mouth as an image of fellatio, taking us back to Leonardo's nursing experiences. The tail thus symbolises a breast/penis. Freud argues that Leonardo takes a passive position, and that the nursing experience at the mother's breast is transformed later to fellatio. It is thus a reconstruction of oral infancy from an adult screen memory. As we will see, Freud also assumes that Leonardo had a loving and rather exclusive relationship with his mother, which resulted in his fixation on her, and in his homosexual constitution. It is worth noting that while Freud was even at this early point proposing that we might have to deal with homosexualities in the plural (an idea which in the period between the 1950s and the 1980s was surely obscured), and that various homosexualities might have a different story of psychosexual constitution, the issue of heterosexual constitution remains taboo. Heterosexualities are not suspected of being the result of equally unsettling processes of compromise formation.

In what follows, I talk about Leonardo's mother following several moves in the Freudian text: firstly, the anatomisation of the mother; secondly, the pre-oedipal riddle (based on the construction of the vulture-mother and on the construction of fatherlessness); and thirdly, post-oedipal silences and Leonardo's creativity.

### **The Anatomisation of the Mother**

The trouble with Leonardo's mother, Caterina, is that she is not attributed an internal third. In a sense, she is reduced to her anatomy, she is a 'woman', growing in the confines of her biology and being able to relate to others (including her son) from within these confines. In the parts of the text where she is attributed some modality of desire, she meets us as an unproblematic heterosexual woman. Like so many women who have found one of the successful solutions to the problem of castration, she has a child, which she can now put in the place where her envy of the penis was. Leonardo is her child-penis. These assumptions that Freud makes about Caterina are concerning because they are anatomizing. They reduce psychosexual constitution to anatomical sex.

This is achieved at first by broadening the scope of analysis, and bringing in other clinical examples that support Freud's construction:

In all our male homosexual cases the subjects had had a very intense erotic attachment to a female person, as a rule their mother, during the first period of childhood, which is afterwards forgotten; this attachment was evoked or encouraged by too much tenderness on the part of the mother herself, and further reinforced by the small part played by the father during their childhood. Sadger emphasizes the fact that the mothers of his homosexual patients were frequently masculine women, women with energetic traits of character, who were able to push the father out of his proper place. I have occasionally seen the same thing, but I was more strongly impressed by cases in which the father was absent from the beginning or left the scene at an early date, so that the boy found himself left entirely under feminine influence. Indeed it almost seems as though the presence of a strong father

would ensure that the son made the correct decision in his choice of object, namely someone of the opposite sex. (1910a, p. 99)

Although Freud does mention the complication of 'masculine women' in painting his picture, shortly after he reinforces the idea of the absence of the embodied father. Masculine women are in the end still 'women', and if they are not paired with a 'man' they will put the boy 'entirely under feminine influence'.<sup>3</sup>

Later in the text, Freud (1910a, pp. 115–117) explicitly puts Caterina in the place of the woman who has to compensate for not having a husband; the unsatisfied mother, who robs her son Leonardo of part of his masculinity. The supposed 'violence of her caresses' is naturalised, and it is read backwards from Leonardo's dream:

For his mother's tenderness was fateful for him; it determined his destiny and the privations that were in store for him. The violence of the caresses, to which his phantasy of the vulture points, was only too natural. In her love for her child the poor forsaken mother had to give vent to all her memories of the caresses she had enjoyed as well as her longing for new ones; and she was forced to do so not only to compensate herself for having no husband, but also to compensate her child for having no father to fondle him. So, like all unsatisfied mothers, she took her little son in place of her husband, and by the too early maturing of his erotism robbed him of a part of his masculinity. A mother's love for the infant she suckles and cares for is something far more profound than her later affection for the growing child. It is in the nature of a completely satisfying love-relation, which not only fulfils every

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<sup>3</sup> Describing the psychic moves through which the young boy becomes a homosexual, Freud (1910a, p. 100) writes: 'The boy represses his love for his mother: he puts himself in her place, identifies himself with her, and takes his own person as a model in whose likeness he chooses the new objects of his love. In this way he has become a homosexual. What he has in fact done is to slip back to auto-erotism: for the boys whom he now loves as he grows up are after all only substitutive figures and revivals of himself in childhood—boys whom he loves in the way in which his mother loved him when he was a child. He finds the objects of his love along the path of narcissism, as we say; for Narcissus, according to the Greek legend, was a youth who preferred his own reflection to everything else and who was changed into the lovely flower of that name.'

mental wish but also every physical need; and if it represents one of the forms of attainable human happiness, that is in no little measure due to the possibility it offers of satisfying, without reproach, wishful impulses which have long been repressed and which must be called perverse.

In the last part of his paper, Freud (1910a, pp. 131–132) concludes:

His illegitimate birth deprived him of his father's influence until perhaps his fifth year, and left him open to the tender seductions of a mother whose only solace he was. After being kissed by her into precocious sexual maturity, he must no doubt have embarked on a phase of infantile sexual activity of which only one single manifestation is definitely attested—the intensity of his infantile sexual researches.

If we remain in the anatomical domain, however, some very unsettling things happen to identification. In the case under discussion, identification becomes unconceivable. If we anatomise sexual difference, what does it mean for Leonardo to be 'like' his mother? This likeness is impossible without the symbolic detour, without reading sexual difference as always already figured and symbolised, while surely relying on the body, and its irreducible materiality. In other words, perhaps a more relevant question to ask about Caterina would be: could she figure her body as a sexed body, different from some sexed bodies and alike to others? Did she have a singular unconscious idea about masculinity and femininity, able to take a form in her interactions with others, including her son? How was Caterina's body singularly erogenised (above and beyond her overt object choices for men, which the historical record can provide, since she had sex with Leonardo's biological father and was at a later point married to another man)?

These questions are not meant to formulate impossible demands on Freud in the space of his own text and in view of the limited information that he had access to for writing the psychobiography of Leonardo. Rather, I wish to open a potential space for thinking about an *overinclusive view of development* (Benjamin 1991, 1995, 1998; Fast 1984). Within this view, Freud's Caterina is a somewhat psychoanalytically

unrealistic figure. She is too schematic. She appears rather as the reflection of the fantasy of the oedipal boy, who wishes to keep the mother all to himself. What would it have meant for Leonardo to enter the oedipal phase? Here, the stories we usually tell are based on an abrupt shift from mother-love (identification) to father-love (separation). Father-love, as such, gains a defensive character; it becomes a sort of 'beating back the mother' (Chasseguet-Smirgel 1976; Benjamin 1998, p. 54). But in the oedipal phase, ambivalences are included, where both the boy and the girl see the mother as a rival, but also as a loved figure of identification, continuing on the investment that pre-existed. Furthermore, there are authors (especially Jessica Benjamin) who have come to think of a *pre-oedipal thirdness*, grounded in a logic of both/and, and not in one of mutual exclusivity – but it is nevertheless a state of achieved psychic *thirdness*, in which the subject is gradually and overinclusively coping with a second figure, and thus amplifying their individuation. This non-oedipal thirdness is, as well as the oedipal one, a phase of *differentiation*, and not one that can be reduced to fusion. Without it, it would be hard to imagine successful oedipal solutions. In the overinclusive phase, children attempt to 'encompass sexual difference by incorporating what they learn about the other's body inside themselves, forming bisexual identifications and elaborating them. In their bodily play and representations, children make analogies to cross-sex experience. They imagine they can be and have everything, and create representations of both sexes through this fantasy' (Benjamin 1998, p. 62). The overinclusive view rewrites castration: *both* boys and girls have to deal with the renunciations of this completeness. Furthermore, the oedipal does not overturn the overinclusive position; rather, they *co-exist*; and it is from their co-existence that solutions to the post-oedipal (and object love) develop.

### **The Pre-Oedipal Riddle: The Vulture-Mother and Fatherlessness**

The pre-oedipal is not absent in *Leonardo Da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood*, but it is worth pondering the palette that Freud uses to colour it. The pre-oedipal bears two marks, or it is populated by two figures: the seductive vulture-mother; and the father in the negative, or the prefigured absence of the father. These two constructions of Freud's each deserve our consideration.

The seductive mother (in the strong image of the vulture-mother) dominates the pre-oedipal scene. Leonardo's mother emerges as passionately seductive, dangerous and even incestuous. She overpowers the boy with her undivided love, thus robbing him of his masculinity. As we saw, Caterina is put by Freud in the schematic and problematic place of the 'single mother', who attempts to compensate for the deprivation of a husband through taking the little Leonardo as her love object. Caterina is never suspected of having an internal third, or of being able to be part of a choreography of care with multiple subjects. Discussing Leonardo's homosexuality, Freud (1910a, p. 98) writes:

When we remember the historical probability of Leonardo having behaved in his life as one who was emotionally homosexual, the question is forced upon us whether this phantasy does not indicate the existence of a causal connection between Leonardo's relation with his mother in childhood and his later manifest, if ideal [sublimated], homosexuality. We should not venture to infer a connection of this sort from Leonardo's distorted reminiscence if we did not know from the psycho-analytic study of homosexual patients that such a connection does exist and is in fact an intimate and necessary one.

This excerpt sheds an important epistemological clarification on Freud's method in this period. Careful about overgeneralisation and consistent in his commitment to de-pathologise homosexuality, he builds the argument about the connection between mothering and homosexuality by invoking other clinical evidence, beyond Leonardo. The 'catch' of such a construction is that it becomes very hard to criticise it from within. But left uncriticised, the ambivalences in the Freudian text (amply visible in the paragraph quoted below, in which he postulates a connection between the presence of a strong father and 'correct decision' in the choice of object) are consequential. They contribute to a heteronormative universe, they anatomise our notions of identification, and they impoverish our efforts to understand sexualities in the plural.

Following up on the same thesis of the over-mothering of Leonardo, Freud presents us with some interpretations of his painting *Madonna and Child with*

*St. Anne*, and of a related drawing that includes John the Baptist. Freud nearly suggests a hallucination, with many mothers breaking out of the painting. The Madonna is read as representing Leonardo's stepmother (Donna Albiera), while *St. Anne* is seen as a condensation of Leonardo's biological mother (Caterina) and his paternal grandmother (Monna Lucia). The fact that the bodies of Madonna and *St. Anne* appear as merged together might suggest a bi-headed parental figure that is exclusively feminine, confirming the idea of the absence of the father.

But is this hallucination of many mothers readable outside Freud's own countertransference with Leonardo's figure and with his art? To put it differently, what is the role of the analyst's own structure of phantasies in working with and across the small and elliptic details that constitute the raw matter of psychobiographies? Thanapulos (2005) discusses the role that Freud's own relationship with his mother had in the way he constructed his account of Leonardo. Addressing the issue of Freud's (perhaps too) much debated inexactitude<sup>4</sup> in translating as a vulture what in fact was a kite, Thanapulos (2005) writes: 'In giving focus to Leonardo's phantasy, he had the chance to become master of a phantasy of his own, fulfilling his wish to appropriate his winged mother.' It remains an incontestable fact that Freud's translation error furnished the mythological connection with the Egyptian vulture-mothers, the goddesses bearers of the phallus. What it also provided is a mythological foundation to the discussion about fatherlessness: for the Egyptians, only female vultures existed; they were impregnated by the wind, while flying.

My argument here is that the idea of fatherlessness (complementing the idea of the seductive mother) marks the Freudian account of the post-oedipal. The problem with Leonardo's supposed fatherlessness is that it is assembled from a combination of insufficient biographical knowledge, misinterpreted elliptic stories, and sociological-historical inaccuracies that project the moral strictures and familial customs of nineteenth-century Austria back onto fifteenth-century Florence. In his study, Freud writes:

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<sup>4</sup> It is widely acknowledged that Freud made an erroneous identification of the bird central to Leonardo's screen memory. He thought that it was a vulture (in German *Geier*), while Leonardo in fact speaks of a *nibbio*, i.e. a kite (*Milvus milvus*).

It is here that the interpretation of the vulture phantasy comes in: Leonardo, it seems to tell us, spent the critical first years of his life not by the side of his father and stepmother, but with his poor, forsaken, real mother, so that he had time to feel the absence of his father.

Years of disappointment must surely first have elapsed before it was decided to adopt the illegitimate child—who had probably grown up an attractive young boy—as a compensation for the absence of the legitimate children that had been hoped for. It fits in best with the interpretation of the vulture phantasy if at least three years of Leonardo's life, and perhaps five, had elapsed before he could exchange the solitary person of his mother for a parental couple. And by then it was too late. In the first three or four years of life certain impressions become fixed and ways of reacting to the outside world are established which can never be deprived of their importance by later experiences. (1910a, p. 91)

A first important correction relates to the meaning of the event of a child being born outside marriage in fifteenth-century Italian cities. It was not exceptional at the time for higher-ranking men to have illegitimate sexual relations with lower-ranking women. The resulting children were less stigmatised than Freud suggests (Herding 2000). It was not uncommon for these children to be accepted and raised by their fathers or by one of the relatives in the paternal family (Schröter 1994). This was also Leonardo's fate: he was assigned from birth to the family of higher status and wealth – the family of his father, Ser Piero. Thus, what Freud introduces as a compensatory event for Ser Piero's lack of children is much more likely to have been simply the course of familial custom. It was also not uncommon for the children thus accepted in the family to be given full access to the social network and resources of the father, with the exception of legitimate succession to property (Schröter 1994). One other important peculiarity of Florentine child-rearing was that the infants of wealthy families were given to wet nurses for the first few years of their lives. As it was often too costly for the wet nurse to be living in the house with the family, the children were separated from their families. Caterina is likely to have been a special kind of wet nurse to Leonardo, one who also was his biological



mother. These arrangements, however, present themselves to us mostly as fifteenth century 'business as usual.' There is no peculiar dislocation or fatherlessness that Leonardo had to go through. When Freud assembles his evidence, he obviously has in mind the family of the nineteenth century, and the precarious destinies of the illegitimate children of his time.

Another set of corrections concern crucial biographical details. They surely cannot give us the 'final word' on the enigma of Leonardo's creativity, for the same reason we have already stated: we still do not know enough about Caterina's desires and about her third-within. What these details reveal, rather, is Freud's great investment in the idea of fatherlessness. We now know that Caterina was married soon after Leonardo's birth (probably after about eighteen months). We also know that in 1454, two years after his birth, Caterina gave birth to a girl, Piera. Thus, it is likely that Leonardo had to share his mother's affections from very early on. Finally, Leonardo was not given to his paternal family when he was three to five years of age, as Freud suggests, but while he was still in his toddler stage. We do not know if Caterina continued to see Leonardo after the wet nursing period, when he was entrusted to the paternal family; but, since they lived in close proximity to one another, this is very likely (Bramly 1991, p. 42).

### **Post-oedipal Silences: Leonardo's Creativity**

The spectre of fatherlessness makes a post-oedipal account of Leonardo's creativity impossible in Freud's writing. We saw how Oedipus has been projected back onto the pre-oedipal, through the marks of the vulture-mother and the absent father. In what follows, I propose an account of Leonardo's post-oedipal creativity, via the overinclusive understanding of development. Here, the focus is on better understanding the mature artistic solutions that Leonardo found to his own struggles, which were necessarily pre-oedipal, oedipal, and post-oedipal alike. Instead of becoming fixated on the anatomising question 'but what about the father?' in Leonardo's biography, we will need to humbly accept that we do not know enough about the desirous journeys of any of Leonardo's care-givers (for instance, we know nothing of Caterina's masculinity!). We will also need to accept that the image of a voracious, seductive and incestuous mother, who overwhelms and 'eats up' her son, might be a phantasm of the Freudian

unconscious, and also of the Western cultural unconscious more broadly. Furthermore, we will need to consider that the artistic work of Leonardo is laden with details that might take us even further in understanding him than his kite screen memory.

In the sphere of the overinclusive perspective on psychosexual development, the oedipal does not simply abolish the inclusivity that comes before it (Benjamin 1998; Aron 1995). In the post-oedipal phase, they coexist. The oedipal is not the final achievement or terminus point of development, as is often implied in psychoanalytic theory. As it is based on ideas of complementarity and mutual exclusivity, in and by itself it is incompatible with the demands of recognising difference, which stand at the centre of adult life.

In her book *Shadow of the Other*, Jessica Benjamin (1998, p. 64) speaks of the 'capacity to tolerate conflict' of the mature ego as an inheritor of the overinclusive position, and as an inheritor of the complex coexistences between the overinclusive position and the oedipal position. As she clarifies: 'I am tempted to think that a benign form of splitting the ego in relation to gender may well be an important accomplishment: "*I know I am not That but I feel like That*". It allows us to own our conflicting aspirations and yet accept our limits. Identification with otherness necessarily throws us into paradox: I both am and am not the thing with which I identify. I have to be able to accept the impossibility of incorporating otherness, but retain the ability to imagine it without being threatened or undone by it' (my emphasis). In this conception of identification, the anatomical/symbolic/ontological operate together; and the reduction to the anatomical criterion becomes impossible. Benjamin (1998, p. 64) writes: 'anatomically correct identification is not necessarily a sign of psychic differentiation. Sexuality demands a metaphorical rather than a concrete understanding of the body'.

Leonardo's many sketches and drawings of the body are his own metaphors, even if some of them remain unfinished. There is a somewhat paradoxical element in Freud's interpretation of Leonardo's creativity. On the one hand, the famous smile which repeats itself in Mona Lisa, St. John the Baptist, Bacchus, and other works, acquires the qualities of a true fetish. It is seemingly a result of Leonardo's fixation on his mother. On the other hand, his constant invention and exploration through sketches is treated as merely unaccomplished work. But is it not the case that the presence of

both completed and uncompleted works of art point precisely to Leonardo's capacity to tolerate conflict? Does the fact that he could draw both corpses and angels not show the same capacity, rather than serve as an instance of ambivalence?

To get even closer to Leonardo's specific creativity, I remain in the space of Jessica Benjamin's theorisation. Her idea of overinclusiveness makes us suspicious when it comes to so very hastily detaching Mona Lisa's smile from her face and calling it the art-form of a fetish. Within the overinclusive position, as well as in the oedipal, something is lost. Something is interrupted. Leonardo, too, seems to have lost something that was very dear to him. It might indeed have been a certain form of presence of his mother, who also served as his wet nurse, and who – for about two years – was always around, and then is likely to have come and gone, entering and exiting his life. Caterina might even have shown ambivalent feelings toward her son, given the fact that she knew about their planned separation, when Leonardo would be left to the father's family. One of the most compelling theories about the origin of Leonardo's artistic gift is formulated by Eissler (1961), who stresses the trauma ensuing from the separation of the mother, as described above, and argues that his talent derived from an over-cathexis of the connection between the eye and the hand. For Leonardo, seeing led immediately to drawing. Thus, Leonardo could protect himself from outside stimuli, and could adapt to the specific demands of a situation in which his beloved mother kept leaving him.

Regarding Leonardo's own voice on creativity, there is a strikingly interesting but little-known fragment in which he gives recommendations to other artists. He tells them: 'when you are painting you ought to have by you a flat mirror in which you should often look at your work. The work will appear to you in reverse and will seem to be by the hand of another master and thereby you will better judge its faults. [...] It is a fault in the extreme of painters to repeat the same movements, the same faces, and the same style of drapery in one and the same narrative painting and to make most of the faces resemble their master' (Kemp 1989, pp. 202–203). What I see here is a post-oedipal Leonardo, capable to take distance from himself and to be self-reflexive. He is preoccupied both with the artist's practice of taking himself as a love object through representations in the work of art, and with fetishistic repetitions. Used in order to better see the imperfections

of a work of art, Leonardo's mirror is not Narcissus' water. The inversion of his painting that he obtains in his mirror seems to be metaphorising Jessica Benjamin's view of (post-oedipal) identification: I both am and am not the thing with which I identify. In its reflection, the work is both familiar and foreign to the painter.

### **Rereading the Myth of the Vulture-Mothers**

In 1910, Freud mistook the kite (in Italian, *nibbio*) in Leonardo's dream for a vulture (in German, *Geier*). It is Freud's vulture that made it into the psychobiographical account of Leonardo. Insisting on Freud's slip is far from an overinvestment in Freud's mistakes or inaccuracies. Placing a vulture in Leonardo's dream allowed Freud to make the connection to Egyptian mythologies, in which vultures or vulture-headed beings stand for mothers. As he writes:

In the hieroglyphs of the ancient Egyptians the mother is represented by a picture of a vulture. The Egyptians also worshipped a Mother Goddess, who was represented as having a vulture's head, or several heads, of which at least one was a vulture's.

We learn [...] that the vulture was regarded as a symbol of motherhood because only female vultures were believed to exist; there were, it was thought, no males of this species. A counterpart to this restriction to one sex was also known to the natural history of antiquity: in the case of the scarabaeus beetle, which the Egyptians worshipped as divine, it was thought that only males existed. How then were vultures supposed to be impregnated if all of them were female? This is a point fully explained in a passage in Horapollo. At a certain time these birds pause in mid-flight, open their vagina and are impregnated by the wind. (1910a, pp. 88–89)

The picture of vulture-mothers that Freud paints is equivalent to an image of the end of sexual difference. In Egyptian mythologies, there are only female vultures, standing for a phallic and parthenogenetic mother. It is this mother that Freud believes Leonardo wished for (and feared) in his dream. Leonardo is once again strongly oedipalised; his fears are those of an oedipal boy, afraid of dissolving

into the mother. Bradley (1965) offers us a Kleinian interpretation of the figure of the vulture, insisting on the idea of voracity: 'the vulture was chosen to represent oral-sadism in religious belief and ritual because of its general scavenging nature and perhaps because of a specific use to which it was put in cleaning the bones of the dead. This made it a suitable vehicle for representing phantasies of oral-sadistic attacks on the breasts.' What we are missing with both the Freudian and the Kleinian interpretations is a more playful reading of the female vulture bearers of the penis. The Egyptian mythological vultures are not phallic mothers who reject sexual difference. As in Jessica Benjamin's (1998) post-oedipal elaboration of gender overinclusivity, these vultures have worked out the partial nature of any identification and appear to be telling us: *I know I am not That but I feel like That*.

## Conclusions

A critique of Freud means understanding his ideas in context, while also discerning the theoretical and institutional context of psychoanalysis *after* Freud. A return to Freud might help us preserve the logic of his gesture, despite the blind spots and ambivalences such as the ones that appear in his text on Leonardo Da Vinci. He was indeed concerned with the universality of bisexuality, and he argued that *all* kinds of object choice are an outcome of a process and a delimitation. Thus, he did not deem homosexuals fundamentally different from heterosexuals. As he writes in 1905 (p. 145n1): 'psychoanalytic research is most decisively opposed to any attempt of separating homosexuals from the rest of mankind as a group of special character.' Similarly (1905, p. 139n2): 'The pathological approach to the study of inversion has been displaced by the anthropological'. As I have argued, Freud's ambivalences about the understanding of sexual difference pass through the tendency to circulate (too) freely between the anatomical/symbolic/ontological layers of identification.

After Freud, much has been lost. After the Second World War, in the context of the solidification of dogmatic psychoanalytic camps, and an increasingly hierarchical understanding of sameness and difference (with difference always being regarded as superior), various phantasms emerged in relation to sexualities. We are looking at more than thirty years of detour into the pathologisation of homosexualities.

By reflecting on the powerful fantasies of the seductive mother and of fatherlessness, and on their operation in Freud's 1910 text, we make possible a set of alternative (non-oedipal) mother fantasies. These alternative fantasies have an important potential role to play in recapturing Freud's radical edge, and repairing what was lost after Freud. Caterina is not an oedipal boy's fantasy, but she is a subject in her own right. There is no need for her to fade away and to lose her internal third in our account of her, even while we take seriously Leonardo's fantasy world and his own mother-fantasies.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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